

Weaponless!  
By Jim Zubkavich

Ever since I started playing Dungeons & Dragons, I noticed the sheer amount of emphasis placed upon a character's weapons and armor. It's obviously a huge part of the role-playing game experience, especially in the fantasy genre. The characters covet their fabulous magical weapons, the shining plates or glistening chainmail shirts. It was something I took for granted. It was as part and parcel of the game as the attribute scores or hit points.

It wasn't until my brother ran me through the classic Slavers AD&D series of modules that I saw a different side to the equation. For the uninitiated, the final module of the series (A4- In The Dungeon of the Slave Lords) begins with a horrible setback for the player characters. Stripped of their weapons and armor, the group has to fight their way out of an underground prison and confront the masters of the Slavers army. It completely threw me for a loop. A fighter without their magical sword, a wizard without a spellbook or a rogue left without thieves tools. What a cruel and inhumane thing to do to the characters. What a great challenge!

If your group is used to wading through armies of creatures with their perfectly honed weapons or blasting things to bits with powerful magic, an adventure that takes some of their power and glory away can really throw them a curve ball. It doesn't have to be as extreme as the old Slavers module was, but you can still achieve some unique role-playing encounters by making them weaponless to one degree or another.

The simplest and most immediate weapon-barring situation may arrive upon their next arrival at a major city. In a medieval fantasy world where people can shoot fire from their fingertips or cleave redwood trees in half with glimmering blades, it would make sense to have strict laws about weapons and magic within city limits. Extreme areas could even confiscate weapons all together until the party is prepared to leave. It'll cause an uproar to be sure, but if the group has important business to attend to in town, what will they do? They can obviously try to sneak some weapons by the guards, but that could have its own problems. The spellcasters may have an advantage, but if they cast spells within city limits, the punishment should be quite severe. At the very least, the group of players will get a message: don't take those weapons for granted.

Having the group enter a pit fighting competition or gladiatorial match is a fast way to make them weaponless. If the rewards are good enough and the atmosphere right, they'll strip their armor off and enter the ring to prove their worth. It's a wonderful way to get them looking up rarely used maneuvers like bull rush, grappling and subdual damage. The battle suddenly isn't a hack and slash encounter. They've got to use their brains and their brawn to come out a winner.

Capturing a deadly monster instead of killing it can perform a similar function. Not many groups have nets, clubs and bludgeoning weapons handy for these types of problems. The brainstorming and improvised weaponry needed to knock a big beast into unconsciousness can provide a weaponless type scenario without taking anything away from the group. Of course, the creature they're hunting won't have any reason to hold back, making it even deadlier.

I've found that these weaponless types of situations bring a new dimension to combat and a player's ability to improvise. Instead of always reaching for the weapon at their side, they're forced to think of alternatives. The objects

around the group become potential weaponry or characters forced to hide their weapons get creative with sneaky methods. It's a challenge every bit as worthy as a battle, but different enough to keep them on their toes. If the group is particularly inventive, award them bonus experience points and heap on the praise.

It's important not to use these situations in any permanent fashion. Confiscating weapons and then having them stolen is an excellent way to have a group at your throat. Players are rightfully proud of their characters' possessions, and it's not fair to snap away their primary attack forms with no way to get them back. It should always be a temporary setback, a way to make them think. You want them to learn to use their other skills and abilities, to not just go for the easiest or most violent answer to every situation.

Of course, there are classes that function better in these circumstances. Clerics, Druids and Monks are affected much less by the loss of their weapons. It's safe to say that the healing powers of the Cleric and Druid will come in quite handy when the party is fighting without their best weaponry. They may have their spells, but almost all of it will be poured into the healing and stat boosting arts to keep their companions alive. In a totally weaponless situation, the monk can go from being a capable combatant to the best the party's got! Suddenly this monk character has to be the frontal assault and prove their meddle while the rest of the group fights at less than their best.

Don't think that a weaponless scenario is limited to fantasy-based d20 games. Modern and futuristic worlds can have even more stringent laws and far more ways to enforce them with fancy technology. Even if the players are top secret agents or high-ranking officers, there's always a place where weapons would not be allowed. Metal detectors, sensors, cameras and guards can't be evaded forever and a character will soon realize that this time a pistol or knife is more trouble than it's worth. It keeps them thinking, creates dramatic tension and raises the stakes if combat does occur.

The key here, as with any adventure, is variety. The players look to you as the source of an evening's entertainment and you're doing your best to give them adequate challenges. Taking the things that they take for granted like their weapons or spells and giving them an adventure where they have to go without can shake things up and make for a memorable tale. Don't make a habit out of stripping your crew of their gear, but make sure they appreciate the items they have with the occasional equipment setback.